



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time | Year C



"I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! Luke 12: 49



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Anima Christi

Soul of Christ, sanctify me

Body of Christ, save me

Blood of Christ, inebriate me

Water from the side of Christ, wash me

Passion of Christ, strengthen me

O good Jesus, hear me

Within your wounds hide me

Let me never be separated from you.

Defend me from the malicious enemy.

In the hour of my death call me

And bid me come unto you

That I may praise you with your saints.

Forever and ever.

Amen

Catholic
**Faith, Life
& Creed**
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Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
Faith, Life, & Creed*
Doctrinal Sessions.

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Liturgical Context

- ▶ Jesus speaks of fire in today's Gospel. Fire is an important symbol in the Church. We light a sanctuary lamp as a sign that God is present. We light a new fire at the Easter Vigil, a sign of God's presence, conversion and power. We process behind the sacred pillar of fire when we process behind the light of the Easter Candle at the Easter Vigil. Light and fire is an important symbol in our Church. It is a sign of Christ, the Light of the World who is in our midst.
- ▶ Jesus' urgent message picks up momentum as he continues on the journey to the cross.
- ▶ The Gospels of these weeks are from the section of Luke's Gospel that takes place "on the way to Jerusalem." It is a journey every Christian must take.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

Reading 1: Jeremiah 38, 4-6. 8-10

- ▶ Jerusalem is under attack (588-587 B.C.E). Israelite King Zedekiah Jeremiah asks for an appraisal of the situation.
- ▶ Zedekiah was a cowardly, gutless, puppet king under the domination of their Babylonian conquerors.
- ▶ He wanted Jeremiah to tell him that the insurgency he was planning would be successful.
- ▶ Jeremiah did not give him the answer he wanted. Jeremiah assured the Israelite king that the rebellion he was planning would fail—it was a fool's plan. It meant certain death and destruction.
- ▶ The king would simply have to surrender.
- ▶ Jeremiah told the people they would need to pray and repent for their sins.
- ▶ In the heat of battle Jeremiah was asked if he would implore God's help.
- ▶ He denied their request and affirmed that in spite of Nebuchadnezzar's weakened troops, he would be victorious over Zedekiah's forces.
- ▶ Needless to say the Israelite king was furious and had Jeremiah arrested for treason—for abandoning his sentry.
- ▶ Zedekiah went back to Jeremiah another time hoping that God would relent; God did not relent. Jerusalem would be conquered.
- ▶ Such is the backdrop of today's reading.
- ▶ The military leaders accused Jeremiah of destroying morale, thus weakening their troops resolve, thus causing their overthrow.
- ▶ The leaders threw Jeremiah in a pit and left him to die.
- ▶ King Zedekiah's Ethiopian servant rescued Jeremiah from a pit that was constructed in such a way that he never would have been able to get out by

himself.

- ▶ God's work of salvation would not be thwarted, however. A non-Jew—a foreigner—saved Jeremiah from the pit. God's saving plan would continue—no thanks to the sinful people of Israel.
- ▶ Jeremiah suffered for the sake of preaching God's word.
- ▶ His suffering looks forward to the future suffering of the Christ that is echoed in today's Gospel.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ The king thought God would be on their side—never mind that he was a weak, spineless rogue. He thought he could manipulate God into action. We always think we too are the good guys—we are never on the side of wrong, always on the side of righteousness. How does that relate to our world today? What are the implications and what does the Zedekiah story have to teach us today?
- ▶ Jeremiah spoke truth to power. What is the lesson for us today? Have you ever spoken truth to power? If not, have you ever known anyone who has? What can we learn from the experience?
- ▶ Each of us is baptized priest to serve God's people, prophet to proclaim God's word by our words and our actions and king to lead people to Christ. Thus each of us is called to be a prophet. Some, however, are called to a more powerful prophetic ministry. We have known some of those people in our own day and our own time. Who are some people who have spoken out at great risk to themselves for the sake of the Gospel or for the sake of God's people? Do you know anyone who possesses strong prophetic gifts?
- ▶ What happens to prophets when they speak out?
- ▶ Have you ever exercised your role as prophet? Please explain.
- ▶ How can we be sure a word is from God? In other words, how can we recognize the prophet's voice in our world?
- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?

Second Reading: Hebrews 12, 1-2

- ▶ Today's reading places “faith” front and center again. The letter to the Hebrews hearkens back to the Old Covenant and the ancient paragons of faith such as Abraham, our father in faith.
- ▶ The New Covenant ushers in Christ, the ultimate example of faith—outshining any faith-filled person who ever lived.

- ▶ Today's liturgy is a clarion call for perseverance in the face of persecution. The letter reminds the reader that they must remain steadfast in the face of life's painful challenges.
- ▶ The Christian journey is the ultimate athletic contest—the participant must have his or her eyes on the prize, thus completely abandon the self—a kenosis—of self to accomplish the goal, requiring total commitment.
- ▶ The “cloud of witnesses” in the letter is a reference to the cheerleaders who stand behind the athlete to cheer them on to victory. They were the ancient heroes of faith who came before him and who prepared the way for Christ.
- ▶ Like saints of today they can be honored and venerated, but nothing they did compares with the person and mission of the Christ—his life, mission, passion, death, and resurrection for the sake of the world.
- ▶ If the Christian wants to imitate anything; that is what they should imitate—Jesus Christ crucified and risen.
- ▶ The author of the letter was consoling the Jewish Christian audience for the persecution they were experiencing for their faith in Christ by their Jewish counterparts and by the Romans.
- ▶ Even though they had yet to shed their blood for the sake of the Gospel, the days was coming, thus they must remain steadfast in the face of suffering, trials and persecution if they wish to endure.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story or reflection from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ What does an athlete do to prepare for a contest? How does that relate to the Christian life? What is the author telling us we must do?
- ▶ While none of us will probably be burned at the stake for our faith in Christ, we will experience persecution of sorts—ridicule, misunderstanding, division—what do today's reading and liturgy teach us we should do in the face of such persecution?
- ▶ What is one way we can prepare for religious persecution in our lives?
- ▶ Do your neighbors know that you are a Christian? If not, why not?

Gospel: Luke 12, 49-53

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?

- ▶ Jesus speaks of being baptized by fire. A time of decision was coming. All would be forced to make a decision. Were they with Christ or not? Their decisions could have lasting effect. Family members--brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers--all could turn against one another.
- ▶ Remembering that this discussion is a continuous teaching by Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, the disciples are discovering that following Jesus is a dangerous proposition. They are already discovering that it sometimes causes discord in the family. Mark's Gospel tells the story of Jesus' conflict with his own family. They thought he was insane (3: 21).
- ▶ If Christians could expect persecution even within their own families, how much more could they expect that same persecution as they preach the Gospel "out there" in the world?
- ▶ They had to stay focused.
- ▶ Jesus was calling them to radical, urgent conversion. Persecution could be expected; it was coming and could come to their house.
- ▶ Jesus speaks of baptism by fire. Fire is a dominant symbol in the Church.
- ▶ In this context it is a possible reference to the coming of the judgment of the human race when Christ returns. It could also be a reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost when the Spirit came as tongues of fire.
- ▶ One way or another it is an urgent call to conversion. Listen and respond, my people--NOW!
- ▶ It is unthinkable to that our life in Christ would cause division and tear families apart. Yet God does not tamper with human freedom. People are free to accept God in Christ or not. They will either embrace the fire or they will be scorched by it.
- ▶ People must make a decision; they are either for Christ or they are against him.
- ▶ The symbol of fire in sacred Scripture has many meanings. Fire can mean judgment; it can mean God's protection. Fire can be a reference to testing and purification.
- ▶ God manifested himself to Moses in fire—in the burning bush. Thus, fire is a sign of God's presence. Moses led the people through desert and the Red Sea by a pillar of fire—God's presence and protection. Fire was a sign that God was involved in the lives of human beings.
- ▶ Jesus tells us today that he has come to purify the earth by fire.
- ▶ The baptism Jesus speaks of is the fire of suffering and death he is about to endure

for the sins of the world on the cross of Calvary.

- ▶ Jesus must suffer the fire of suffering and death before the Spirit can come as tongues of fire—the fire of new birth, rebirth, renewal and new life at Pentecost.
- ▶ Families are to stand up and take notice. Are they with Christ or are they against him?
- ▶ There was an ancient apocalyptic belief that families would fall apart in the last days as a result of the moral disintegration of humanity.
- ▶ Since Calvary was the passageway to the end of days, (as it goes) Jesus death and resurrection also ushered in this final disintegration of the family.
- ▶ Believers were living in the last age and thus family discord was to be expected.
- ▶ Believers were faced with a decision; we are faced with the same decision today. Are we for him or not?



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ Are you for Christ or not? What would you do if your family were to disown you for your faith in Christ?
- ▶ Recall a time in your life when you made a decision for God or for Christ. What did it take to make such a decision? What did it cost you?
- ▶ Why was Jesus' message so urgent? Why should we be similarly urgent today? What is the hurry?
- ▶ Jesus was calling for radical discipleship. Why should we be similarly urgent today? What is the hurry?
- ▶ When you consider all the properties of fire and that it is a symbol that embodies God's presence, what is it about fire that reminds us of God?
- ▶ Jesus is calling us to have radical faith in him—a burning blazing passionate faith. Who do you know that has such faith? Describe that person. What is it about that person that causes you to believe their faith is passionate, burning and blazing?
- ▶ What does this Gospel teach us about the Christian mission?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

Concluding Prayer

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session

OR

Spirit of God,

You came in the form of fire and wind to the apostles and disciples.

In your coming, you changed timidity to boldness,
and fear into prophetic witness.

Come to us, we pray, and transform our hearts.

Enkindle in us the fire of your love.

This we ask through Christ our Lord.

OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

#1. Years ago I was embroiled in a bitter conflict in a former parish. Both sides of the conflict thought their position was the only position that was ordained by God. Each side demonized the other. We thought for sure that since we were on the side of righteousness (never mind that we gossiped as much about the “other side” as we were gossiped about). If anyone tried to stick their heads above the fray and be a voice of reconciliation and reason they would find themselves on the outside looking in—not a comfortable place to be. Those, however, were the prophetic voices in our midst. The rest of us failed to use our baptismal gift; we stayed in the conflict until the last exaggerated gossip was told. The Jeremiahs among us had long ago been rescued from the pit. We had only our broken friendships and relationship to show for the ridiculous conflict.

Jeremiah teaches us that we must listen to the prophets in our midst. God is not always on the side of those who think they are the most righteous—that, in fact, is the problem and the very reason why God would refuse to act in the first place—our own feelings of self-importance and self-righteousness.

#2. An athlete spends days, weeks and months preparing for a contest. They train, they stretch, they run, they eat right; the wrestler oils his body down. (The ancient Church used that image as an explanation for anointing the body with oil—like a wrestler they oiled their body down so as to be slippery to the devil’s grip and power). If I, like the athlete, remain vigilant in small things, then I will have practiced being vigilant in the big things—the things that ultimately matter. Thus, when I pray regularly, when I avoid gossip, when I reach out to the poor and needy, when I am a voice for the voiceless, then I will have practiced doing what is right when the time is right. I will have the voice to speak truth to power when I am called upon to do so.

I would hope that if real persecution came knocking at my door I would have the strength to persevere. I remember a time in which I was ridiculed for my faith in Christ. It was by someone very close to me; it was a very painful experience. I can only imagine what it would be like to be totally rejected for my faith in Christ. I would hope I would have the courage stand up for my faith no matter what the cost.

#3. Years ago a young woman was preparing for baptism. As the day grew closer she shared how her mother told her that if she went through with her decision to be baptized she would never be allowed to return home again. The young woman was terribly distraught. “How could a mother disown her daughter?” She prayed and asked for wisdom and strength. She decided to go forward. Her love of Christ simply had to outweigh what she was losing. She affirmed she would be baptized into a new family in Christ—they now would be her family.

The day of her baptism arrived. I gave her a hug and told her that we would be walking with her and how courageous I thought she was. She burst into tears and said that God worked a profound miracle. That morning a package arrived. While her mother still

refused to come to her baptism, she conceded that God must be leading her and she sent her a Bible and told her she loved her.

We felt privileged to experience first hand what Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel. Our lives are first and foremost rooted in Christ—all else is secondary.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Baptism
Holy Spirit
Faith
Prayer
Evangelization

Saints
Jesus Christ
Revelation I or II
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

BAPTISM

Jesus talks about being baptized by fire. The symbol of fire is given at baptism as a sign of Christ's Light that dwells within. Today would be an appropriate time to consider what the Church teaches about BAPTISM.

HOLY SPIRIT

Jesus speaks of being baptized by fire—a blaze set over the earth—a prelude to the coming of the Holy Spirit as tongues of fire at Pentecost. Today would be an appropriate occasion to reflect on what the Church teaches about the HOLY SPIRIT.

FAITH

Today's liturgy is an extended invitation to grow in faith. Perseverance in the face of struggle requires steadfast faith. Thus, today's liturgy exhorts us to increase our faith in God and to be faithful in the face of persecution. Thus, the focus of our extended doctrinal session will be FAITH.

PRAYER

Today's liturgy is a clarion call to persevere in the face of persecution. The only way we will have the strength to persevere is by commitment to prayer. Jesus taught us that prayer and Christian discipline is the only answer. Thus, today's doctrinal session will focus on PRAYER.

EVANGELIZATION

Today's liturgy calls us to go out and preach the Good News—to remain steadfast in faith and to be willing to stand up for the Gospel no matter what—even if we are rejected by our families. Thus, today would be an appropriate time to reflect on what

the Church teaches about our baptismal responsibility to evangelize. Our doctrine session will focus on EVANGELIZATION.

SAINTS

The first reading tells the story of Jeremiah, an Old Testament saint. The letter to the Hebrews speaks of our ancient examples of faith—today we call them saints. He reminds us that none surpasses Christ, but they are examples of virtue in our lives. Jesus gives us the recipe for sainthood in today's Gospel—patient endurance and persecution for the sake of the Gospel. Today would be an appropriate occasion to focus on the SAINTS of the Church.

ESCHATOLOGY

Jesus' parable of the rich fool is a reminder that choices we make in this life affect our life after death. We are to share what we have with others, detach from our possessions and enter into communion with God. In so doing disciples can be confident of sharing eternal life with God forever. Thus, today would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about ESCHATOLOGY, HEAVEN, and HELL AND PURGATORY.

JESUS CHRIST

Each Sunday would be an appropriate time to reflect on Jesus the Christ. Today is a most appropriate time as Jesus continues his journey to Jerusalem, the climax of his saving mission. Thus, today our extended session will be on JESUS CHRIST.

REVELATION I or II

Jesus' sense of urgency in the Gospel is a reminder that his time of fulfillment is about to come. Full revelation of God in Christ is coming to fruition. Jesus is preparing them to encounter him in his glory when he returns again. Thus he continues to exhort his disciples to pray, to persevere and to remain faithful to his teaching—his revelation. The entire Gospel is revelatory—that is, it seeks to reveal God to believers. Today would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on REVELATION.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.